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Erkki Huhtamo

The Spell of the Catoptric Television

Media Archaeology, Topos Study, and the Traces of Attention

*We are always turning in the same circle,
always rolling the same stone.*

Gustave Flaubert in a letter to Louise Colet,
April 22, 1854

The Power of Topoi

How can we research media attention as a historical phenomenon? This essay suggests one way from a media archaeological perspective. Media archaeology is a *traveling discipline*, a bunch of approaches loosely tied together by some common threads, but also with significant differences among its practitioners.¹ Because of this, it is necessary to define in what sense the concept *media archaeology* is being used here. I call the variant I have been developing for the past twenty-five years *media archaeology as topos study* or simply *topos archaeology*. The idea of *topos*, which refers to recurring elements that travel within and across cultural traditions for hundreds and even thousands of years came from the German literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius.²

1 Erkki Huhtamo, Jussi Parikka, An Archaeology of Media Archaeology, in: E. Huhtamo, J. Parikka (eds.), *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, pp. 1–21, p. 3.

2 Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern, 1948, translated into English in 1953 as *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, new Version trans. by Willard R. Trask, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

Topoi can be compared to empty vessels or molds that are filled with new content as they reappear in changing cultural contexts. They represent continuities, but can also point to ruptures and transitions. The interpretations and meanings of topoi change in the course of their migrations, as I explained in condensed form in my article *Dismantling the Fairy Engine. Media Archaeology as Topos Study* and will demonstrate in greater detail in a forthcoming book.³

Unlike Curtius, I do not think topoi only exist within literary traditions. Visual imagery functions in similar ways, as Aby Warburg demonstrated with his notion *Pathosformel* (pathos formula) that likely influenced Curtius' *topos*. Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* also anticipated media archaeology.⁴ It explored visual culture by means of thematic tableaux, collages that challenged the linear style-based accounts typical for art history. Warburg pointed out migrations and transformations of visual motifs in terms of fields instead of surface vectors of cause and effect. He broke down artificial disciplinary barriers by linking academic art with non-canonical forms like magazine illustrations and advertisements, questioning the orthodoxy of academic art history. The *lives* of topoi do not respect institutional and

3 See Erkki Huhtamo, *Dismantling the Fairy Engine. Media Archaeology as Topos Study*, in: Huhtamo, Parikka 2011 (as fn. 1), pp. 27–47.

4 The best edition is Aby Warburg, *L'Atlas Mnémosyne*, translated by Sacha Zilberfarb, Paris: L'écarquillé – INHA, 2012.

cultural boundaries, least of all those separating high from popular culture. Neither do those who research them. The nature of topos archaeology is interdisciplinary.

Cultural contextualization is more important for me than it was for Curtius. He operated *within* literary traditions, demonstrating how topoi such as *the world upside down* migrated from one text to another.⁵ That is not sufficient for media archaeology. Topoi must be treated as both transhistorical and as symptomatic manifestations of the times and places where they appear. As I understand it, the task of media archaeology is therefore Janus-faced: it traces topoi *between* contexts and analyzes them *within* contexts. In media culture topoi serve at least three roles: as connectors to older and broader cultural traditions; as discursive commentaries on media cultural forms, themes and fantasies; and as motifs exploited by the culture industry. These days they are modified and disseminated by potentially anyone on the Internet.⁶ *Topos transmissions* can be detected in all areas of media culture. They are not limited to the distant past; the Internet is both a topos disseminator and a generator, recycling age-old topoi and giving birth to new ones.

Let us look at Mark Ulriksen's satirical painting *Capturing the Memories*, which was used in the cover of *The New Yorker* in 2012.⁷ A family of four has been lined up for a vacation snapshot in a tropical paradise, their backs turned to the stereotypical lagoon with palm trees (a topos). Each family member is fingering a mobile phone, utterly lost in its spell. The invisible person who is taking the photo is using

one as well, as we can tell from the shadow cast on the sand. Similar scenes have become a token of everyday life. As merely sitting in a crowded restaurant can often demonstrate, direct face-to-face contacts have been challenged by gazes into handheld screens.⁸ Ulriksen deliberately exaggerates, but only a little. Normally people still glance into the lens when they are being photographed (or taking selfies themselves). The example seems to confirm Guy Debord's insight from *The Society of the Spectacle*: "[T]he real world becomes real images, mere images are transformed into real beings – tangible figments which are the efficient motor of trancelike behavior."⁹

Ulriksen's cover illustration is worth comparing with a television commercial created to promote Microsoft's already forgotten Windows Phone 7 (2010). It too depicts a society mesmerized by mobiles. The commercial, code-named *Really*, recalls, perhaps unintentionally, René Clair's 1927 silent film *The Crazy Ray (Paris qui dort)*, where Paris is collectively mesmerized by a mad scientist operating a diabolic machine.¹⁰ All Parisians, except those who had been up high enough (in the Eiffel Tower or in an airplane), have been turned into zombie-like sleepwalkers without a will of their own. In *Really* there are also characters who are still *awake*, but for a different reason. They are free from the spell of the mobile phone, craving direct contact: a woman frustrated with a phoning massage therapist; a man expressing

5 For an exploration of this topos, see Frédéric Tristan, *Le monde à l'envers*, Paris: Atelier Hachette & Massin, 1980.

6 Erkki Huhtamo, *Obscured by the Cloud. Media Archaeology, Topos Study, and the Internet*, in: Thorsten Lomker (ed.), *ISEA 2014 Dubai. Location. Proceedings of the 20th International Symposium of Electronic Art*, Dubai: Zayed University Books, 2015, pp. 22–35.

7 *The New Yorker*, July 23, 2012.

8 As an indication of how fads change, the 2015 version might show all five people posing together for the smartphone, attached to the end of a telescoping *selfie stick*. Taking a selfie may still command a momentary eye contact, albeit mediated.

9 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 2004, paragraph 18.

10 René Clair, *The Crazy Ray*, France 1924. *The Crazy Ray* is also a meta-cinema, an investigation of a medium to manipulate space and time. Clair was the director of the dadaistic film classic *Entr'Acte*, France 1924, where similar tricks were already used.

condolences over a mobile dropped in a toilet; a sexy wife losing her temper because of her husband's disinterest; and a boy hitting his absent-minded father with a baseball.¹¹ The commercial ends with an ambiguous slogan: "It is time for a phone to save us from our phones [...]. Designed to get you in and out and back to life."¹² It is hard to say if the irony is deliberate or not: the only way to solve the current ills of social life caused by a gadget is another – essentially similar – gadget.

On surface level both the magazine cover and the television commercial are comments on the same timely problem. Topos archaeology can demonstrate that they are also re-activated versions of a pre-existing topos, which has been encountered numerous times in the formative development of media culture, commenting on the consequences of excessive attention to new gadgets. Before rushing to conclusions about the unique impact of smartphones, it is worth studying the *media manias* that are claimed to have broken out ever since the Kaleidoscope became a fad in the 1810s.¹³ Media maniacs lose their loved ones to invisible suitors or end up in all kinds of accidents, over and over again. Some people manage to stay unaffected, ridiculing or pitying the

addicted.¹⁴ The recurrence of the topos demonstrates that the current discourse on sleepwalkers staring into mobile screens, oblivious of their surroundings, is unprecedented only to a degree, more because of the scale of the phenomenon than because of the motif itself. The excavations could probably be extended even further back in time to include collective manias not related to technology.¹⁵

Media archaeology should not limit itself to textual or visual analysis, which would run the risk of ignoring or misrepresenting the tangible – the material and performative – aspects of media culture. That is why I analyzed the moving panorama in my book *Illusions in Motion. Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* on three levels, which I called the painted, the performed, and the discursive panorama.¹⁶ I tried to demonstrate why it is important to relate media archaeological discourse analysis to investigations of material and technological factors. I also pointed out the necessity of discussing media dispositives and their actualizations within media practice as part of the topos archaeological endeavor. My research has led me to the conviction that topoi can manifest themselves in hardware design, technological features as documented in patent documents, feedback mechanisms, and user interfaces. However, they cannot be independent of contexts of conception and use.

11 Created by the ad agency Crispin, Porter and Bogusky. See Windows7Phone, Really: New Windows Phone Ad, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=55kOphD64r8> (accessed January 8, 2018). In the campaign's pilot commercial, *Season of the Witch*, time has slowed down or stopped completely in a crowded street – a bicyclist has fallen, a car has hit a pole, and a load of fruit have dropped to the ground. A few people are moving like sleepwalkers, bumping into each other, but most are entirely frozen; everyone is staring at a portable device. See windowsphonepro, Season of the Witch: New Windows Phone 7 Ad, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=LglgbVGk19k> (accessed January 8, 2018).

12 Except for this voiceover message and a few short remarks, the commercials are only accompanied by music, Donovan's *Season of the Witch* and Edvard Grieg's *I Dovregubbens hall (In the Hall of the Mountain King)* from the *Peer Gynt Suite*.

13 I will analyze this issues in detail in a forthcoming book.

14 For examples, see Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion. Media Archeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2013, pp. 77–79 and passim.

15 Charles Mackay pointed a possible way to proceed in his Victorian classic *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and The Madness of the Crowds*, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1995 [1841, 1852]. Remarkably, the book is still in print.

16 Huhtamo 2013 (as fn. 14).

The Magic Mirror as a Magickal Transmitter and Receiver

Applying this media archaeological approach to the screen in visual practice can link today's ubiquitous personal screens and their usages, dispositives, and discourses to an example known by many names: *magic(k) mirror*, *enchanted mirror*, *sorcerer's mirror*, *scrying mirror*, etc. It is interesting not only because of its ambiguous relationship with media history, but also because of its intertwined material and discursive identities. The magic mirror does not only belong to the past, as an Internet search can easily demonstrate. A website promoting New Age energy therapy defines it as a "divination tool for looking into past lives, and past, present, and future events". The writer provides the following operating instructions: "Sit before your mirror and begin to imagine objects on its surface, one after another. You should try to see these images clearly in the mirror with your eyes open, just as if they were there in reality." Most people, the text continues, "do not see the images appear with the physical eyes on the mirror's surface but see within the mirror and in the mind's eye. The mirror acts as a focal point, a gateway within."¹⁷ The website sells round and oval scrying mirrors made of glass or acrylic plastic, but the Internet also offers *how to* instructions for making one's own by covering a clear glass plate with black matte spray paint.¹⁸

There are people who consider the magic mirror as an operational device that actually works when used in scrying

practice.¹⁹ The web page "How to use a Scrying Mirror / Magick Mirror" describes it as a "powerful psychic tool" for "seeing into darkness", stating that it "allows communication with higher realms and the subconscious".²⁰ The scrying mirror is claimed to have numerous uses: "To contact spirit guides, To access knowledge, For healing and self improvement, As a magickal [sic] transmitter and receiver, For divining the past, present and future, As a Portal to the Astral Plane, For shamanic journeying, For ritual invocation and evocation, To improve visualization skills." The comments left on the website discuss the making, purchase, and consecration rituals of the scrying mirror. Someone has recorded concerns: "1/isn't it risky to go almost [sic] into another world? 2/what if we wont be able to return?" etc.²¹ For the commentators the scrying mirror seems a perfectly practical gadget, and in that sense little different from the mobile phone. One of the comments could almost have been left by a media archaeologist: "Basically a scrying mirror is the first television and phone thing that ancient people used back then?"²²

Except for their paranormal concerns, these descriptions evoke issues that are often associated with the *interface logic* of media machines, that are subsumed by the term screen. Concentration is required to turn the magic mirror into a *gateway* – to make it, as a Wiccan puts it, to "appear as

17 Scrying Mirrors – Natures Energies, <https://naturesenergieshealth.com/metaphysics/divining/scrying-mirros/> (accessed June 22, 2017).

18 See in particular Donald Tyson, *How to Make and Use a Magic Mirror. Psychic Windows Into New Worlds*, Custer, Washington: Phoenix Publishing, 1995.

19 The name "magic mirror" is also used for Asian metal mirrors with illusionistic properties. Janet Leigh Foster and Stephen Herbert have authored the definitive book on them, *Magic Mirrors. A 2000-Year History of Asia's Most Sensational Secret*, forthcoming. Magic mirrors could also be related to the Claude Mirror, black glass mirrors used by landscape artists as sketching aids.

20 Somethingswiccan, How to use a Scrying Mirror / Magick Mirror, <https://ebay.com/gds/How-to-use-a-Scrying-Mirror-Magick-Mirror-/1000000009366585/g.html> (accessed June 22, 2017).

21 Ibid., comment by Adarsh Barman, posted March 5, 2017.

22 Ibid., comment by Rylan Sasaki, posted June 6, 2017.

a dark tunnel or window”.²³ The surface is dynamic; it “will begin to change and fade; a dark mist will appear”.²⁴ The Wiccan emphasizes that the magic mirror is a personal medium, warning: “Do not let others look into its surface, except in ritual context.”²⁵ Anyone using a mobile phone in a public environment certainly shares this idea, although for different reasons. For another scrying practitioner, “the images are interactive”.²⁶ Such comments resonate with issues that occupy scholars interested in the media user’s sharing habits. Is mental absorption into the screen more effective, safer (especially when the user is in motion) or more dangerous than distracted multitasking? What is at stake in interactive media experiences? Does physically manipulating the user interface keep the user from getting totally immersed into the audiovisual realm or contrariwise lead to a tighter bond with what is represented on the screen? How are social and individual media experiences related with each other?

Investigating the bonds with seemingly superfluous devices like the magic mirror may have lessons in store for researchers of media reception and interaction. Media archaeology does so by searching the past for excavation sites where *magickal transmitters and receivers* may lie buried. Most often they are found as fragments of discourse rather than as archives or material remains.²⁷ From time

immemorial, reflecting surfaces have been used for observing one’s own likeness, but also “for looking into past lives, and past, present, and future events”.²⁸ In *Le miroir* (1978), a media archaeological magnum opus *avant la lettre*, Jurgis Baltrušaitis excavated a wealth of material and discursive magic mirrors, covering huge stretches of space-time.²⁹ Although he did not use that particular word, as a window or gateway to an *elsewhere* the magic mirror can be interpreted as a *topos*, a recurring figure or formula. Together with countless other topoi, it contributed to the slow formation of media culture. Baltrušaitis used the anachronistic concept “téléviseur catoptrique” (“catoptric television”) about the visions said to have appeared on magic mirrors, implying that magic lore and technological screen-based media can be related with each other.³⁰

The best known of Baltrušaitis’s examples is a prophecy the court sorcerer Michel de Nostredame (Nostradamus, 1503–1566) is said to have presented to Catherine de’ Medici (1519–1589), the queen consort of France, by means of a magic mirror.³¹ According to the story, the highly superstitious Catherine was anxious to know the future of her children, and especially to find out who would succeed her on the throne. Nostradamus made each of her sons appear in turn in a magic mirror, passing in front of Catherine’s credulous

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Honor Seed, comment at “Black Mirror Scrying – Has anyone tried it?”, See <http://abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread190611/pg1> (accessed June 22, 2017). The same writer used the expression: “These interactive visions I saw.” Both messages posted January 12, 2006.

27 An Aztec magic mirror, made of obsidian and thought to have been used by the Elizabethan alchemist John Dee in his scrying practice, is kept at The British Museum. It is almost circular but with a protruding part serving as a handle. In *Hudinbras* (1663), Samuel Butler is thought to have referred to this mirror, used by Dee’s associate Edward Kell(e)y, as “The Devil’s

Looking Glass.” For further information search the British Museum, Collections Online, for “Dr Dee’s Magical Mirror / Dr Dee’s Magical Speculum” <http://britishmuseum.org> (accessed June 22, 2017).

28 Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror. A History*, trans. Katharine H. Jewett, New York, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 108–110, pp. 195–196, pp. 262–264.

29 Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Le miroir. Révélations, science-fiction et fallacies*, Paris: Elmayan/Le Seuil, 1978. It is regrettable that this major work was never translated into English.

30 Ibid., p. 208. Chapter VIII gives many examples about the tradition of magic mirrors.

31 Ibid., pp. 184–187, pp. 206–208; Melchior-Bonnet 2002 (as fn. 28), pp. 108–110, p. 195.

eyes as many times as he would have years to reign. The story is still often evoked in paranormal circles and treated as fact. An extreme case is a book of conversations with Nostradamus by Dolores Cannon, a “past-life regressionist and hypnotherapist, who specializes in the recovery and cataloging of ‘Lost Knowledge’”.³² The conversations were conducted via a spirit medium.³³ At the beginning of each session, after the medium had fallen into a state of trance, she established a contact with the famous magus through a magic mirror she saw in Nostradamus’s study. Nostradamus agreed to meet the medium “in some other dimension” which was “gray and formless with no more substance than drifting clouds” (obviously this is what the medium saw in the mirror). Nostradamus confirmed that the magic mirror was the very same one he had used to concoct the vision for Catherine.

Was Catherine surprised to see the figures move in the mirror, the medium asked? Not really, Nostradamus answered, because she was accustomed to court magicians, but “felt uncomfortable, because she saw that all of her sons wouldn’t survive.” Had Cannon studied Baltrušaitis’s work, she would have found out the apocryphal nature of the story.³⁴ In *Trésor des histoires admirables* (1614), Simon Goulart recounted a version said to have been told by Albert de Gondi (1522–1602), duke of Retz, who was Catherine’s grandchild,

32 From Cannon’s Amazon.com author’s page, https://amazon.com/Between-Death-Life-Conversations-Spirit/dp/1940265002/ref=la_B001K818HK_L1_4?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1525703563&sr=1-4 (accessed June 22, 2017).

33 Nostradamus, Dolores Cannon, *Conversations with Nostradamus*, Vol. 2, Revised Edition, Huntsville, AR: Ozark Mountain Publishing Inc., 1992.

34 It is ironical that the magic mirror became used in the title of collections of Nostradamus’s writings. See Michel de Nostredame, *The Complete Fortune-teller: being the Magic Mirror of Michael Nostradamus; Also, the Infallible Divination by means of Figures, or Arithmancy of Count Cagliostro*, London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1899; Nostradamus, *The Magic Mirror; being the complete fortune-teller of Michael Nostradamus*, New York: Zend Avesta Pub. Co., 1931.

but it may have been oral folklore.³⁵ Variants were produced over the following centuries. In Honoré de Balzac’s version, a woman (or a man, say others), gifted with second-sight and brought to the Castle of Chaumont by Nostradamus, placed the Queen “in front of a magical mirror in which a spinning wheel was reflected, each child’s face appearing at the end of a spoke, the soothsayer made the wheel turn, and the Queen counted the number of turns. Each turn was a year of a reign”.³⁶ Balzac’s imaginary device brings to mind a lottery wheel spinning on a television screen. In the tradition of *magia naturalis*, writers from the phantasmagoric Étienne-Gaspard Robertson (*Mémoires*, 1831) to Fulgence Marion (*L’Optique*, 1867, trans. *The Wonders of Optics*) suggested that Nostradamus had performed a trick of technological sleight-of-hand, which needed a rational explanation.³⁷ In other variants there is no magic mirror at all, just spirits moving around within a magic circle drawn on the floor.³⁸

35 Simon Goulart, *Le troisieme et quatrieme volume du Thresor des Histoires Admirables et Memorables de nostre temps [...]*, Cologne: Samuel Crespin, 1614, pp. 438–439. Goulart gives the name of the source as “Marechalle de Raiz.” His version mentions that the scene in the mirror took place in a “hall”. The trick would therefore have featured some kind of a stage set. If it ever took place, it would most likely have happened in the summer of 1556 in Paris.

36 Honoré de Balzac, *About Catherine de’ Medici and Other Stories*, trans. Clara Bell, Philadelphia: The Gebbie Publishing Co., Ltd, 1900, p. 254.

37 Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs scientifiques et anecdotiques*, I, Paris: Chez l’Auteur et a la Librairie de Wurtz, 1831, p. 344; Fulgence Marion, *L’Optique*, Paris: Hachette, 1867; *The Wonders of Optics*, trans. and ed. Charles W. Quin, New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1871, pp. 199–200. For an illustration of one possible arrangement of the dispositive, see fig. 56 (between pages 200 and 201). In his *letter IV* David Brewster gave a scientific explanation of such devices (without referring to Nostradamus) in *Letters on Natural Magic*, London: John Murray, 1833, pp. 59–62.

38 Nicolas Pasquier’s version, see Baltrušaitis 1978 (as fn. 29), p. 187. In an engraving published by Baltrušaitis both versions have been combined. Nostradamus is shown doing his tricks within a magic circle, while the vision appears in a large horizontal mirror placed above a fireplace (ibid.). The source of the illustration is unknown. It can be traced back to Émile-

The appearances of views into a distance via an optical device, or *catoptric televisions*, to adopt Baltrušaitis's term, form an extensive topos tradition. Beside the many forgotten texts, magic mirrors can be found in classics like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Act IV, Scene I) and Sir Walter Scott's *My Aunt Margaret's Mirror* (1828), where two noble ladies consult the advice of a mysterious savant from Padua, who has a "very tall and broad mirror". It happens that "as if it had self-contained scenery of its own, objects began to appear within it".³⁹ The scene the ladies saw was "as if represented in a picture, save that the figures were movable instead of being stationary".⁴⁰ Francis H. Underwood's story *The Exile of von Adelstein's Soul* (1872), set in fifteenth-century Vienna, also featured a magic mirror.⁴¹ Baron von Adelstein drives his coach over a young man, who happens to be the son of a witch, Frau Eldzeit. The young man dies, and the witch casts a spell, forcing the soul of the baron to leave his body at nights and to settle into the embalmed body of the dead man. The baron's chaplain and confessor, Father Wilhelm, begins to investigate why the baron becomes lifeless in the night and only recovers in the morning. He consults Albrecht Werner or Albertus Nyktalops, a mystical "philosopher" who has "a wonderful speculum or mirror of steel [...] by means of which distant objects and even spirits of the dead are brought within view at pleasure".⁴²

Jules Grillot de Givry, *Le Musée des sorciers, mages et alchimistes*, Compiègne: Impr. de Compiègne; Paris: Libr. de France, 1929, but not further.

39 Sir Walter Scott, *My Aunt Margaret's Mirror*, in: *Waverley Novels, Vol. 40, Chronicles of Canongate. First Series. The Surgeon's Daughter. In Two Volumes, II*, Boston: Samuel H. Parker, 1833, pp. 198–235, pp. 224–225.

40 Ibid.

41 Francis Henry Underwood, *The Exile of von Adelstein's Soul*, in: *Cloud-Pictures*, Boston: Lee and Shepard; New York: Lee, Shepard & Dillingham, 1872, pp. 1–78. *The Exile of von Adelstein's Soul* was written in 1858, but published for the first time in this volume.

42 Ibid., p. 35.

The device is kept "in a darker room without angles or resting-places for the eyes, – all its lines, as in a perspective, tending to one point, in which was placed the speculum".⁴³ Father Wilhelm felt how "[t]he floating nebulous light that hung over its surface struck him with apprehension, for no lamp or other means of illumination was visible".⁴⁴ The brightness was so intense that "after looking at the wonderful light in the speculum, all other objects around were invisible in the gloom".⁴⁵ The mirror could only be consulted at night as "with the coming of dawn its brightness is dimmed, and at sunrise its power of reflection is gone."⁴⁶ Whether this disk of polished steel, which Albrecht had "obtained, while travelling in the East, from an Arabian philosopher", was a product of black or natural magic, "always within the limits set by the great First Cause", is left open.⁴⁷ Father Wilhelm's experience of looking at "the present occupation of some of the Baron's friends"⁴⁸ is worth quoting:

*The priest fixed his eyes steadfastly upon the mirror, and thought of the Baron. Slowly the mirror seemed to become a window, expanding every moment like the opening of an iris, and growing more transparent, until at last there was before his vision the family group in the palace; the Baron rising from his chair, his mother shedding tears as she was about to accompany him to his chamber, and his sister hanging pensively upon his arm.*⁴⁹

43 Ibid., pp. 36–37.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 38.

46 Ibid., pp. 41–42.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., p. 36.

49 Ibid., p. 38.

It is tempting to interpret Underwood's imaginary device as a media dispositive. The positioning of the mirror as the luminous focal point for observation in a darkened space evokes cinema rather than television; the latter is often watched in lighted or semi-illuminated spaces. But there is a difference: unlike cinema, the system is interactive. Instead of buttons or switches, it uses – anachronistically speaking – a mind-machine interface (MMI): *channels* are *switched* by thinking about the person one wishes to see. Further, as Father Wilhelm discovered when he wanted to consult the scene of the accident where the young man had been killed a month earlier, the magic mirror was capable of presenting *reruns* of past events. He saw “microscopic figures passing through a distant square” as the incident unfolded.⁵⁰ The scenes were silent, which may well have been influenced by a contemporary media form: the room camera obscura, a popular attraction at seaside resorts and elsewhere.⁵¹ The luminous real time image of events unfolding outside was projected on a circular table in the center of the darkened chamber. These comparisons make huge leaps between times and places far apart from each other, but they are not necessarily arbitrary. Material forms of media culture have been anticipated by discursive ones, technological solutions by imaginary or even *magic* ones.

A perfect example of the ways in which a topos tradition can migrate between cultural and mediatic contexts is the story *La Belle et La Bête* (1751), which became a carrier of topoi. Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1711–1780) adapted it in 1756 from a fairy tale published in 1740 by Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, which in turn had been

inspired by earlier sources. Leprince de Beaumont's version became the inspiration for Marmontel and Grétry's successful opéra comique *Zémire et Azor* (1771). Jean Cocteau's classic feature film *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) inspired Philip Glass's opera (1994), while Disney's animation film (1991) is only one of the many re-tellings of the topos within popular culture.⁵² The magic mirror as a way of observing people from a distance was already featured in Villeneuve's tale. Its role in Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* is particularly interesting because the film was released at the moment when television was just beginning its triumphal march.⁵³ Although its adoption in France was slow, television was already an established idea. It is likely that some of the spectators, who saw Cocteau's film, associated its magic mirrors with the television screen.

The television pioneer Alan A. Campbell Swinton stated in 1912: “[I]f there could be added to each telephone instrument what would indeed be a magic mirror, in which we could see even only in monochrome the faces of those with whom we were communicating, the material advantages would be great. In addition, there would be much senti-

52 The magic mirror tradition lives on, beside fairytales, in Halloween post-cards. The magic mirror is depicted as a device for seeing one's future husband or wife. This idea was associated with Nostradamus and Catherine de' Medici almost entirely erroneously in a masonic journal: “The famous Nostradamus conjured up in a magic mirror the phantasmal form of her future husband for Marie [sic] de Medicis.” *Mysticus, A Corner of the Library: The Magic Mirror*, in: *The New Age*, XXIX.6 (1921), p. 274.

53 Since the 1920s, Cocteau's work often referred to contemporary media machines, often in relation to myths from classical antiquity. Magic mirrors play important roles in his poetic films *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930) and *Orphée* (1950) as concretized metaphors and entry points into alternate realities. Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) can be related to the same historical trajectory. It was also evoked in television promotion. See the double-page ad “... and through this looking glass, the Wonderland of NBC Big Color TV!” (c. 1956–1958), in: Steve Kosareff, *Window to the Future. The Golden Age of Television Marketing and Advertising*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005, pp. 116–117.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

51 Underwood acknowledged he was “aware that the device of employing the magical speculum [...] is not a new one.” *Ibid.*, p. vi.

mental and other value.”⁵⁴ Such associations became commonplace. Advertisers began comparing television sets with crystal balls and magic mirrors early on. They were a form of modern wizardry, “man’s strangest dream come true in your home.”⁵⁵ In 1939 a British publication characterized television as “the magic mirror of the living room.”⁵⁶ In 1944, on the eve of the television era, a children’s book looked back into the past while anticipating the future: “If you have a magic mirror you can see a play at a theater without leaving home, you can be with friends who live in another city. The magic mirror makes everything near. What is the magic mirror? It is a *television machine*.”⁵⁷ The Admiral Corporation grasped the connection, branding its line of TV-sets *Magic Mirror Television*.⁵⁸ In 1940, the *Archery News* asked the fundamental question: “May not the magic mirror be nothing but an early conception of the possibilities of Television?”⁵⁹ The media archaeologist’s answer is affirmative, but excludes the words *nothing but*, for the magic mirror has been other things as well.

54 Alan A. Campbell Swinton, Presidential Address. November 7th, 1911, in: *The Journal of the Röntgen Society* VIII.30 (1912), p. 7. Swinton’s ideas about electronic scanning contributed to the development of television.

55 Wulf Herzogenrath, Thomas W. Gaehtgens, Sven Thomas und Peter Hoenisch (eds.), *TV Kultur. Fernsehen in der Bildenden Kunst seit 1879*, Amsterdam, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1997, p. 146, p. 147, p. 157.

56 Reference to “magic mirror of the living room” is from *The Nation’s Business* 27 (1939), p. 97.

57 Michail Il’in, Elena Segal, *A Ring and a Riddle*, trans. Beatrice Kinkead, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1944, p. 72 [original emphasis].

58 *Questions and Answers about Admiral Magic Mirror Television*, booklet, II printing, Chicago: Admiral Corporation, March 1948. Author’s collection. An advertisement in *Life* explained that the “magic mirror” was an aluminum sheet inside the tube to make the picture “twice as bright as ordinary TV.” *Life* 37.11, (1954), p. 25. The expression “the magic mirror of television” remained in generic use *Television Magazine* 13 (1956), p. 62.

59 *Archery News* 19 (1940), p. 36. Only a snippet view can be seen on Google Books.

Conclusion: the Topos Reified

Returning to the issue of attention, it should be clear by now that normally media archaeology can say little about actual experiences. On the contrary, it casts doubt on the truthfulness and accessibility of *direct* observations recorded in discourses. What seems authentic and personal often turns out to be mere topoi in disguise. As members of societies, humans inhabit vast *topos spaces* brimming with received ideas and motifs that are used as molds for expressing contemporary issues and concerns. The topos transmissions happening in these spaces may not be fully acknowledged as such by those living within their reach and even taking part in their dissemination. However, there are those who are fully aware of the power of the topoi and use them to foster ideological and commercial ends. This applies to advertisers, image and identity makers and other professionals of the culture industry. Their businesses are centered on discovering recognizable formulas and revising them just enough to maintain the customers’ interest. More often than not, the formulas are found from the past. Topoi are effective as *tools* because their stereotypical components appeal to mainstream taste while they can also be dressed up and presented as *the Coolest Thing on the Planet*. Camouflaging the Old as the New suggests both a moment of soothing recognition and an awe-inspiring encounter with the *unprecedented*.

The magic mirror is a perfect example because its presence is so widespread in today’s popular culture. It is less due to Nostradamus than to Walt Disney, whose classic animation feature *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) has been seen by millions and has inspired countless products,

both industrial and artisanal.⁶⁰ The iconic still image of the Evil Queen staring into her magic mirror has turned into an Internet meme, provided with captions and photo-shopped into other personalities, including (predictably) Donald Trump.⁶¹ Compared with the examples discussed so far, something else is at stake: instead of displaying far-away scenes, Disney's mirror provides the Queen a *facetime session* with an incarcerated spirit via both sound and image. The talk is all about her. The theme is obsessive narcissism and the compulsion to constantly verify one's own beauty. Disney's magic mirror is therefore closer to the mundane mirror uses we all are familiar with. The popularity of this variant today must be associated with the selfie obsession, which has turned into a global phenomenon thanks to the ubiquity of the smartphone. Millions of people use their phone screens as interactive mirrors, capturing, posting and transmitting their likenesses to others, even naked. The captive spirit questioned by the Evil Queen has been replaced by peers posting replies online. Anything but a *Like* can cause lurid or even tragic reactions.

The idea, presented in the introduction, that a topos can materialize as a technological device has been confirmed by recent developments. As I am writing this, *magic mirror* has become a popular buzzword among both developers and

fans of new technology. Applications vary, but the basic system configuration is relatively uniform: the magic mirror of 2017 is a screen overlaid with a two-way mirror (often a thin sheet of plastic) and connected to a computer. It allows the user to see one's own likeness while consulting information from the computer, the web or social media. The information floating around the user's mirror image is called forth by touches, gestures or voice commands. The screen is normally positioned vertically in the *portrait mode*, but taking the mirror comparison literally, Samsung introduced in 2015 a perfectly round wall-mounted interactive display.⁶² Commercial *Magic Mirror Photo Booths* and *Magic Selfie Mirrors* enhance the posers' likenesses with digital features (much like Sega's Purikura arcade machines did years ago). Companies have also begun promoting magic mirrors to fashion stores, persuading customers to try design clothes and make-up virtually on their screen doubles.⁶³ The magic of the digital mirror is that of commodity fetishism; the awe it produces pure appearance.

The magic mirror has also turned into a do-it-yourself phenomenon. Anything from old PC monitors and tablet computers to flat panel LED screens have been converted for the purpose. Encouragement and instructions can be

60 There are online discussions of whether Disney's Evil Queen used the expression "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall" or "Magic Mirror on the Wall" when invoking the spirit. The latter is correct, although most people seem to think it is the former. Such mistaken collective memories are sometimes called *The Mandela Effect*. Fiona Broome, posted on December 15, 2015, at <http://mandelaeffect.com/mirror-mirror-research/> (accessed July 13, 2017). The question about the Mandela Effect is interesting, but controversial. On her website Fiona Broome defines herself as "author, researcher, and paranormal consultant". Her forte is books about ghosts. <http://fionabroome.com/about-the-author> (accessed July 13, 2017).

61 Trump's figure has been – equally predictably – also inserted into memes inspired by *The Beauty and the Beast*.

62 A circular (and curved?) mirror display that recalls Hugo Gernsback's TV fantasies of the 1920s was introduced by Samsung in 2015 at the Internationale Funkausstellung Berlin (IFA 2015) as part of its Smart Signage Portfolio presentation. It used the company's OLED transparent display technology, unveiled for the first time. The round mirror display was a concept model for the store of the future. The design also resonated with the round displays of smartwatches, including Samsung's own Gear S2, which was released in 2015.

63 Rina Raphael, Interactive 'Magic Mirrors' Are Changing How We See Ourselves – And Shop, in: *Fast Company*, April 6, 2017, article 3066781, <http://fastcompany.com> (accessed July 13, 2017). The writer evokes Disney's Evil Queen as the point of comparison. As an indication of the current attention deficit disorders, a note states the article is a 9 minute read.

found from online resources like the Magicmirrorcentral.com, which defines itself as a “website dedicated to DIY magic mirror making (some people refer to them as Smart Mirrors)”.⁶⁴ The most common technical solution to power the magic mirror is the inexpensive Raspberry Pi mini computer with custom programming in Linux. Personal enthusiasm notwithstanding, there is something puerile in the concept. In earlier manifestations of the magic mirror topos one’s own reflection was normally effaced and replaced by the *data* emanating from a distance. In an era of uncertainty, superficiality and rampant narcissism, it now seems necessary to constantly monitor one’s external appearance (and body functions) and to be reminded that one still exists. The obsessive selfie snapping with any place one visits as background and anyone one meets and greets as *pals* serves the same goal. The magic mirror tradition further looms behind augmented reality applications. Whatever *everyday life* used to mean is no longer enough; it has to be enhanced and boosted, modified and converted.

64 On the *home* page, <http://Magicmirrorcentral.com> (accessed July 13, 2017).